THE CLOSED DOOR

Drawing by S. J. Woolf

BY LEE SHUBERT

RUSSELL SAGE once made the statement that the secret of business success rested to a large degree on a man's ability to invent and devise ingenious so-called "business skeleton keys" that would throw open the closed office doors that stood in his path. In other words, he believed that the man who could manage, in clever and subtle ways, to overcome the obstacles of the doors standing between himself and the Power Inside would have in his possession the real keys to fortune. And Mr. Sage, whose office door was as difficult of access as any of his brother lieutenants of finance, always practised what he preached in this regard by congratulating the young man who, despite the edict of the inner sanctum, had succeeded in some way or another in gaining a hearing with him. The world of business and trade carries on its records the names of several big men of to-day who have confessed that they got their first real start through an audience with some big man of yesterday, an audience won by strategy directed at the tightly closed office door.

In no other line of activity, I feel safe in saying, is the closed office door subjected to so great and so incessant a knocking as in the theatrical business. I think you will grant the truth of this offhand when I suggest that a manager and producer comes into almost constant contact with actors, actresses, chorus girls, showgirls, chorus men, supers, playwrights, would-be playwrights, scene painters, carpenters, electricians, billboard men, wardrobe women, costumers, vocalists, and musicians of all sorts, applicants for jobs as ushers, scene shifters, and so on down the line to, in some cases, even ice-water boys, together with an enormous coterie of cranks and theatrical odds and ends from every State in the Union and many sections of Europe.

Obviously, if a manager granted every caller a hearing, he would need a day of three times the ordinary length; so the door must be kept tightly shut,—sometimes, indeed, even locked,—because there are some individuals who are not at all adverse to taking a theatrical manager's citadel by storm and then trying to sell him a dubious play of their own making, which they are perfectly positive is the long-looked-for "drama of the century." To sift the wheat from the chaff among my callers,—they number, on the average, about four hundred a day,—I employ, as is usual in almost every line of business, the so-called "outside staff"; but, although this staff does its work ably, the grand army of job hunters is not downhearted. And the ways and means by which this army ingeniously seeks to fool the outside attendants and get past my office door to where I sit will, I believe, disclose some new and not uninteresting sidelights on the Russell Sage idea in operation.

FOR five months last year I was bothered by a man who had written a farce and wanted to read his effort to me. The man was a clerk in a shoestore, had never written anything before, and, from what I had learned about him, knew no more about suitable dramatic ideas, construction, et cetera, than the average bricklayer. Although, in reply to the first letter he sent me asking for a hearing, I wrote him that "because of an oversupply of plays, I am sorry to say I shall not be able to consider your play," he persisted in his attempt to see me. He would call up on the telephone at all hours, and would vary the proceedings by hanging around my outside office and trying to apprehend me on my way to luncheon. I had posted the outside attendants, and they told the man, when I passed him on my way out of the building, that I was "Mr. Shubert's lawyer." In this way I avoided a personal meeting with him. Finally, evidently becoming wearied, the man failed to appear around the office for two weeks, and I began to pluck up hope that he had begun an assault on some other door than mine.

The third week, however, I received a letter from him which went on to say that, while I probably believed he had given up his purpose to see me, I was mistaken, and that he was now going to prove to me, even against my will, that I would see him. He closed his letter with this statement: "My farce is the funniest thing of the last six years, and I am sure you will read it all, or at least in part." I was challenged! And I admit frankly that the fellow had my curiosity aroused by his Arsène Lupin manner of telling me confidently he was going to get me, willy nilly. I waited one week—two weeks—three weeks—three months! But nothing happened, and I made up my mind that the man had just been trying to indulge in a gentle little game of bluff and dismissed the matter from my head.

About six weeks ago I received in the mail one morning a picture postal card bearing in quotation marks this typewritten sentence, "The day comes and the day goes, and still the clagos come." Then, in each successive morning's mail, I received, for ten days, similar cards, each bearing a new line of some such caliber as the one cited. The addresses were typewritten; no name was signed; and I began to wonder who was putting up the joke on me (although I could not see exactly just what or where the joke was).

On the eleventh morning I received a picture postal showing a scene in Central Park. There was no writing on the card. On the twelfth morning the picture card presented a scene at Broadway and 42d-st. Again no writing was on the card. On the thirteenth morning the card showed me a picture of the Atlantic City boardwalk. And again the card bore no writing. The addresses were all typewritten, and I began to feel a bit queer over my mysterious correspondent. Who was he, and what in the world was he trying to get at with these odd lines and disconnected pictures? The fourteenth morning brought a typewritten letter, which stated simply that Mr. Archer Leonard, with whom I had been in touch, would call at two o'clock that afternoon.

At two o'clock the office boy knocked on the door and announced that Mr. Archer Leonard was outside. I had not the vaguest idea who Mr. Leonard was; but was curious, and bade the boy show the caller in. Enter the shoe-clerk playwright!

"But," I protested, "your name is Vernton!"

"I sent in my nom de plume," he replied calmly.

"Didn't the office boy know you, though?" I demanded.

"Yes, Sir," he answered.

"But—" I began.

"I'll explain," he said.

The shoe-clerk dramatist then went on to tell me how he had sent me the ten best lines from his farce on picture postals, and had followed them up with pictures of locales of the three scenes of his three acts, knowing that I would read and behold in this way out of sheer curiosity if nothing else. "The busiest man will always look at a picture postal card," he said. And, what was more, I appreciated that the man was psychologically correct. To cut the story short, I admired the fellow's stick-to-it-iveness so greatly that I consented to look over his play; but I found that he should have devoted more time to the play and less to devising means to get into my office. If he had applied his latter talent to the former, another "Baby Mine" might have resulted. Who can tell?

There was only one thing the shoe clerk wouldn't tell me: Why the office boy, who knew him as Vernton, had admitted him as Leonard. I asked the office boy himself subsequently.

"Why, Boss," said the youngster, "that man's not the fella we thought he was when he uster hang around here. He's really a big one, he is!" I asked the office boy what he meant. He pulled a photograph out of his pocket and handed it to me. I looked at it, and beheld Vernton resplendent in a baseball uniform, across the shirt of which were the letters C-H-I-C-A-G-O. "You see," exclaimed the office boy, his eyes distended with admiration, "that guy's a champeen ball player."

I saw it all in a flash; but I did not have the heart to disillusionize the youngster. The shoe clerk had actually gone to the trouble to have his picture taken in a faked-up uniform in order to impress and awe the office boy to the point where the youngster would announce his name to me.

AT the beginning of the last theatrical season I was being constantly bothered by actors who wished positions in the new companies I was putting out. Of course, the great majority of the applicants were not able to get past the outer office; but that did not keep them from lying in wait for me.

There was one actress who refused to be dismissed; who insisted that she must have a part in "He Came from Milwaukee," which I was then putting on; who told one of my assistants who had rejected her application that she would enlist me in her behalf. "But," said my assistant, "you can't see Mr. Shubert. He's too busy."

"Oh, yes, I can," placidly announced the lady. And she forthwith began her crafty attack on the closed office door.

You understand, I knew nothing about the actress' intention to board me in my den, as it were, and had not the slightest idea as to what scheme she was up to.

Four days after her threat to my assistant, a card